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ABSTRACT

"Star Trek II" is a treatment of the penultimate stages of the monomyth in which the hero descends into the underworld and is reborn. This psychological sense of rebirth is evoked in modern audiences by the film. In particular, the doppelganger (psychic double) motif, so often associated in film, literature, and myth with the anticipation of death, takes the form in "Star Trek II" of the double-hero. The film's treatment of the myth bifurcates the hero into the individual characters of Admiral James T. Kirk and Captain Spock. The film suggests, through dialogue and imagery, that Spock is really Kirk's doppelganger. The deaths of the double-hero (Spock dies from lethal radiation and Kirk is killed by the revengeful Khan) are followed by rebirth or the promise of rebirth. The cycle of death and rebirth has another equivalent in "Star Trek II's" sight and sound. Spock is the first character we see and the last voice we hear. The promise of continuity on the soundtrack is reinforced by the image track through cyclical camera movement and specific imagery. The film's premier metaphor for education about the death-rebirth cycle is the Kobayashi Maru Test, a simulation of conflict with a enemy spaceship. Film audiences, because of their identification with the double-hero, are also likely to learn from Kirk's words about the interdependence of life and death. The film employs science fiction metaphors to communicate a timeless lesson about the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. (MG)

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Death and Rebirth in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*

by Lane Roth

The monomyth, described by Joseph Campbell as "the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story" which underlies myths, fairy tales, literature, and religion (3), similarly informs some recent science fiction and fantasy films.[1] Marie Jean Lederman has analyzed the birth and early life of the hero in *Superman, The Movie*, Denis Wood and Andrew Gordon have examined the initiation of the young hero in *Star Wars*, and Lane Roth has considered the mature hero's quest and confrontation with his shadow in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Like *Star Wars* (1977), *Superman* (1978), and *Raiders* (1981), *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982) follows the monomythic pattern. Unlike those earlier films, *Star Trek II* is a treatment of the penultimate stages of the monomyth in which the hero descends into the underworld and is reborn.

"Film and literature matter as much as they do," Frank McConnell has asserted, "because they are versions of mythmaking" (6). Campbell has observed that myth's "understood function is to serve as a powerful picture language for the communication of traditional wisdom" (256). Traditional wisdom of myth and dream, according to Joseph L. Henderson and Maud Oakes, teaches us that "death is universally found to be part of a cycle of death and rebirth . . ." (4). Human rebirth is a general idea that encompasses several forms, including the Christian concept of resurrection of the carnal body after

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death, as well as the secular notion of healing and renewal of the personality during one's lifetime (Jung 113-15). Whatever form it takes and however "beyond sense perception" it lies, the process of rebirth is "indisputably real" in a psychological sense, C. G. Jung has maintained (116).

This psychological reality, which is found in traditional wisdom, is evoked in modern audiences by *Star Trek II*. The film's imagery, dialog, and storyline will be examined here as specific and variant expressions of the universal and invariant death-rebirth cycle. In particular, the doppelganger (psychic double) motif, so often associated in film, literature, and myth with the anticipation of death, takes the form in *Star Trek II* of the double-hero. What Henderson and Oakes have described in myth as "the endless tapestry of destruction and creation" (20), with its associated fructifying power, is represented in *Star Trek II* by the Genesis Project. Initiation, which "brings the theme of death and rebirth into close relation to problems in education" (Henderson and Oakes 4), is represented by the Kobayashi Maru test, a training exercise that begins the film and is later discussed frequently by the major characters.

Star Trek II's treatment of the myth bifurcates the hero into the individual characters of Admiral James T. Kirk and Captain Spock.[2] In contrast to a unified hero, Kirk and Spock as separate heroes "are both less complete and hence less perfect; thus, each must pursue his rite of rebirth separately and in his own way." (Markey 21). Nevertheless the film suggests, through dialog and imagery, that Spock is really Kirk's doppelganger. "I have no ego to bruise," Spock reassures Kirk.[3] Spock's dying words, repeated from an earlier scene,

explicitly identify him in relation to Kirk: "I have been, and always shall be, your friend." Spock's pledges of friendship to Kirk are either preceded or followed by carefully composed images -- mirror reflections or symmetrical profile shots--that communicate visually the bond between the two men and imply that the two characters are two facets of one identity. This is clearly why Kirk's eulogy says emotionally of Spock, who is half human and half alien, "Of all the souls I have encountered in my travels, his was the most--*human*."

Doubling motifs like the mirror image and the dual identity are considered in Otto Rank's psychoanalytic study of the double in literature, folklore, and myth. Theorizing that the double figure may embody a dilemma between a wish for death and a narcissistic defense against a fear of death, Rank noted that the phenomenon may take the form of a reflection or "even a person who sacrifices himself for the welfare of his double--e.g., as in Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*" (76). References to *A Tale of Two Cities* also express the double motif in *Star Trek II*. Kirk is first seen holding a copy of this book, a birthday gift from Spock. At the end of the film, after Spock has died, Kirk recites, somewhat inaccurately, the novel's famous last lines, "It's a far, far better thing I do, than I have ever done before . . . far better resting place I go to than I have ever known" [*sic*]. Sydney Carton utters this as he sacrifices himself at the end of *A Tale of Two Cities* to ensure the safety of his psychic double, Charles Darnay. Similarly, in *Star Trek II* Spock intentionally exposes himself to lethal radiation in order to effect repairs to the spaceship *Enterprise*, allowing Kirk and his crew to escape narrowly a devastating explosion. Kirk recognizes that his relationship to Spock

parallels Darnay's to Carton, when he remarks that Carton's last words were "something Spock was trying to tell me, on my birthday."

Kirk's birthday is announced in the second segment of the film--a dialog scene with Kirk and Spock which relates Kirk's preoccupation with aging to his "fondness for antiques." Spock wishes Kirk a happy birthday that will be, quoting the antique volume, "the best of times." By contrast, in the very next scene of the film, we see that the birthday occasion prompts Kirk to somber reflection rather than celebration. He is seen alone in his living room, which is dimly lit by a fireplace; through a large window we can see that it is night. Kirk's room is decorated with antiques that clash with the futuristic furnishings. An antique clock, seen in the background of the frame and then later heard chiming behind the dialog, is a reminder of time. The antique ships are a significant counterpoint to the starship *Enterprise* of which Kirk soon resumes command. This collision of old and new, antique and futuristic, expresses the death versus birth theme. Dr. McCoy articulates this theme when he visits Kirk and asks why the two of them are treating his birthday "like a funeral."

One of the McCoy's birthday gifts to Kirk is a pair of bifocals. The antiquated, rectangular-shaped spectacles, prescribed for Kirk's failing eyesight, are a visual correlative of Kirk's advancing age. Kirk is later shown wearing the bifocals as he reads *A Tale of Two Cities* privately, in a low-lit corner. When he is conspicuously in the presence of others, however, he puts the spectacles on and removes them furtively, as if to conceal his need to rely on them to read the *Enterprise*'s computer console or his own wristwatch dial. His reluctance to use

the bifocals is vocalized by an impatient and uncharacteristic "damn!" Kirk intellectualizes about life and death, even to the point of pontificating to others, but, like many of us, refuses to accept the evidence of his own finitude.

Concern with age is expressed further by the dialectic, youth vs. experience. When Kirk tells McCoy that "galloping around the cosmos is a game for the young," rather than for veterans, he sounds bitter. The only crew available to assist the senior officers in operating the *Enterprise* are Spock's young trainees, and Kirk voices his doubts about whether "these kids" even know "how to steer."

In response to an emergency, the young are initiated. Kirk, heeding the heroic call to adventure, asks them "to grow up a little bit sooner" than they've expected. While Kirk officially inspects the cadets, he remarks that he and they have "been through death and life together." His reference is to the Kobayashi Maru wargame at the beginning of the film. Presently he and the trainees will experience actual combat together, and the only midshipman to whom Kirk speaks during inspection will be fatally wounded.

After the battle, Kirk tots his life when he is marooned underground by Khan, a former adversary whom Kirk had marooned elsewhere fifteen years ago. Khan, since escaped, is captor of an armed spaceship. Obsessed with revenge, Khan is incensed to learn that Kirk has been promoted to the rank of admiral. Yet Kirk, reflecting on his own life, finds no satisfaction in his career. Instead, he regrets his command decision that incurred the wrath of Khan, and his command position which separated him from a former lover, Dr. Carol

Marcus. Rejoined with Marcus during interment, Kirk is stunned to meet his and Marcus's illegitimate son, who is now an adult. Kirk's admission to Marcus that he is contemplating his "life that could have been, and wasn't," and that he is feeling, "old, worn out," reveals his sense of truncated possibilities.

It is appropriate that Kirk critically assesses his life while he is trapped in the underworld. Stranded deep below the surface of a barren planetoid, Kirk experiences the hero's symbolic death. Kirk and his enemy are both aware of this, because Khan, speaking to Kirk via a communication device, gloats that he left Kirk "marooned for all eternity in the center of a dead planet." Malevolently, Khan repeats, "buried alive, buried alive."

Spock, the hero's psychic double, undergoes a figurative death and, later, a literal death. In the first sequence of the film, Spock becomes a casualty on what appears to be the bridge of a Federation starship engaged in a short-lived space battle with three enemy cruisers. It is quickly revealed that the combat is actually the Kobayashi Maru test, a simulated training exercise for Spock's cadets. Spock and the other "casualties" were merely play-acting to make the simulation convincing. Spock's later death is, tragically, authentic. Then he painfully collapses, and we are, like Kirk, passive viewers unable to help him. This death scene is followed by a burial ceremony in which Spock's coffin is jettisoned into space.

The deaths of the double-hero are followed by rebirth or the promise of rebirth. After the conclusion of the Kobayashi Maru test, Spock arises from his pretense death. Kirk remarks facetiously to the reanimated Spock, "Aren't you

dead?" Later Spock raises Kirk from symbolic death when he "beams up" Kirk, McCoy, Marcus, and the others who had been "buried alive" in the underworld. Both of these resurrections come as welcome surprises to the audience. In the first situation, we are initially unaware that the Kobayashi Maru scenario is a wargame and that the casualties are only play-acting. In the second instance we believe Spock's message is intended as a ruse to deceive Khan, who is monitoring Kirk's communication with the *Enterprise*.

There is no deception, however, in Spock's demise near the end of the film. The promise of his rebirth is communicated, though, by music, dialog, narration, camera movement, and imagery. Spock's coffin is launched into space to the musical accompaniment of "Amazing Grace." Spock, like Jesus, gave his life of his own free will to redeem his fellow man. Spock's sacrificial death allows his double to be reborn; this is made clear by Kirk's dialog after the funeral. In contrast to former doubts about his past and future, and his preoccupation with aging, Kirk now says emotionally, "I feel young." Moreover, in his eulogy, Kirk associates Spock's death with "the sunrise of a new world."

The cycle of death and rebirth has another equivalent in *Star Trek II*'s sight and sound. Spock is the first character we see, as the camera dollies back from a small video screen to frame him in closeup. He is also the last character we hear, as his voice-over epilog revises the familiar prolog to the old television series. Significantly, the new words deny death by assuring continuity: Spock's narration speaks of "the *continuing* voyages of the starship *Enterprise*," and "its *ongoing* mission" (emphasis added).

The promise of continuity on the soundtrack is reinforced by the image track through cyclical camera movement and specific imagery. The film begins with a forward camera dolly through a starfield, over which we see the opening credits. The last shot of the film, preceding the closing credits, is also a forward camera dolly through a starfield.

Two specific images of rebirth are associated with Spock's coffin. The flight of Spock's coffin, launched into space, duplicates the trajectory of a missile seen earlier in a video-lecture explaining the Genesis Project. In this film within the film, a missile containing the Genesis formula is propelled into a barren moon, stimulating the proliferation of life forms. Spock's coffin replicates this missile's path by arcing from lower frame center foreground toward middle frame left background, and landing on the surface of a planet newly created by the detonation of the Genesis device. The second rebirth image is a succession of shots depicting the infant planet's precociously lush verdure. As the camera tracks through the towering trees, we see Spock's coffin, miraculously intact, on the ground. The indices of new life (the verdure) and of death (the coffin) form a composite image, disclaiming the idea that Spock's death represents utter, absolute annihilation.

The Genesis Project itself is a science fiction metaphor for the death-rebirth cycle. The project's director, Dr. Carol Marcus, explains that "Genesis is life from lifelessness. It is a process whereby molecular structure is reorganized at the sub-atomic level into life-generating matter of equal mass." We are shown a video simulation of the "Genesis effect," which transforms a "dead

moon" into a "living, breathing planet." Implanted in an already flourishing planet, Genesis would destroy all existing life "in favor of this new matrix." The Genesis Project, which McCoy contrasts with its slower biblical precedent, can destroy and create life in the same instant.

The Genesis Project is related specifically to the hero's death and rebirth. Buried alive, Kirk recapitulates his life and concludes that he is "old, worn out." Marcus tells him, "Let me show you something that'll make you feel young, as when the world was new," and leads him into an enormous subterranean cave. Marcus's Genesis experiment transformed the "center of a dead planet" into a huge, primeval forest with shimmering waterfalls. The paradisal garden suggests that Kirk and Marcus are science fiction counterparts of the sky god and nature goddess, or of Adam and Eve. The metamorphosis of grave into womb also recalls the mythic hero's encounter with a fertility goddess who helps reclaim him from the underworld.

As we have seen, Spock actually raises the hero from the netherworld; but Spock represents the hero, too. It is Spock, not Kirk, who prepares himself for an ordeal by withdrawing into ritual meditation. Alone in his quarters aboard the *Enterprise*, he is seen kneeling, his fingertips touching, his eyes closed. The full-length black cloak that covers his regulation white blouse signifies mortification of the flesh. While he is meditating, Kirk interrupts. That is when Spock tells Kirk that "logic clearly dictates that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few." "Or the one," Kirk responds. Spock reiterates this dictum

in his death scene where the mythic hero teaches his other half that the continuity of the community may require the hero's sacrificial death.

The film's premier metaphor for education about the death-rebirth cycle is the Kobayashi Maru test. In this conflict simulation, a student commander is lured into a doomed battle with enemy spaceships. Lieutenant Saavik, one of Spock's pupils, fails the test despite what appear to be logical decisions and controlled actions. Afterward, Kirk admits to her that there is "no correct resolution. It's a test of character." He lectures her superciliously that "how we deal with death is at least as important as how we deal with life."

Saavik is told that Kirk was the only Star Fleet cadet to best the Kobayashi Maru test. Repeatedly through the film, she inquires how he achieved this. Kirk does not divulge this information until his descent into the underworld, when he discloses that he altered the rules of the test by reprogramming the simulation. "I don't like to lose," Kirk boasts to Saavik, who perceives correctly that he has "never faced that situation, faced death." Because Kirk is unwilling or unable to confront and accept death, he cannot personally evolve beyond it in the monomythic pattern.

Since the hero resists this stage of his development, his psychic double must undergo that experience as a lesson to him. Spock chooses certain death for himself to save others. Kirk is saved spiritually as well as physically. Spock translates his suffering and sacrifice into a lesson for Kirk by saying, "I never took the Kobayashi Maru test until now. What do you think of my solution?"

After Spock's death, Kirk's vision changes. This is visually signified by a closeup of his bifocals that shows that one of the lenses has been shattered. The shot occurs in a scene in which Kirk confesses to his newly-found son that he has never really faced death until now: "I've cheated death, tricked my way out of death, and patted myself on the back for my own ingenuity. I know nothing." He admits that his earlier lecture to Saavik--"how we deal with death is at least as important as how we deal with life"--was "just words." But Kirk's son assures him that they were "good words," and that Kirk "should listen to them."

Film audiences, because of their identification with the double-hero, are also likely to learn from Kirk's words about the interdependence of life and death. While marooned in the underworld, Kirk quotes Spock as a teacher who is fond of saying, "Where there is life, there are possibilities." The film also teaches that death has possibilities: for example, the rebirth of the human spirit. "*All* storytelling is didactic," even so-called escapist movies, Frank McConnell has insisted (4). This claim clearly applies to *Star Trek II, The Wrath of Khan*, a film that employs science fiction metaphors to communicate a timeless lesson about the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

NOTES

This essay was originally presented at a national conference of the Popular Culture Association.

1. It is beyond the purview of this study to elaborate on the relationship of myth to Christianity and other religions. For standard works on the

subject, see Frazer; Henderson and Oakes; Eliade; and Jung's Collected Works. For works on the monomyth, see Joyce 581; and Campbell.

2. During revision of this study, *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (1984) was theatrically released. While this sequel is in many ways a continuation of *Star Trek II*, there are sufficient differences between the two films, especially in the doppelganger configurations, that justify treatment of *Star Trek II* here and *Star Trek III* elsewhere.

3. This and subsequent quotations not cited are transcriptions of the film's dialog.

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